

The Survival Girls

In his 2006 TED Talk,¹ education expert Sir Ken Robinson relates a memory of the three kings in his son's preschool nativity play: one preschooler said, "I brought gold"; another, "I brought myrrh"; the third, "Frank sent this." Kids will give it a try if they don't know, Robinson argues, but somewhere in there, we begin stigmatizing mistakes, sanitizing potentially fertile community spaces out of receptivity to what renowned educator Paulo Freire calls "rupture," a "break from the old," which I interpret as those moments of weeping, the shouting, the fear, the mistake, the revelation of a personal shame, the outburst.² Robinson's story and Freire's term underscore one of the most important aspects of planning successful development efforts in the coming century, specifically, those targeted at youth in post-conflict zones: the "safe space" requisite for individual and communal

trauma recovery, which is in turn requisite for innovation and society-building by the people and for the people in developing nations.

Last year, in Kenya, I worked for the summer as a volunteer operational partner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I mobilized a performance group in a Nairobi slum for Congolese refugee girls, most of whom are orphans and survivors of severe gender-based violence who didn't know one another before I began work with them. The Survival Girls, as they call themselves, not only created a piece of theater about gender-based violence for World Refugee Day 2011 but kept meeting while I was gone that fall, taking the initiative to:

- Create (and perform to much fanfare) a theater piece for AIDS awareness and another about the importance of education for girls
- Assign each other roles of public relations officer, secretary, treasurer, and president
- Start a website
- Apply for a loan of equipment from an aid organization to run a cyber café, which they hope can provide enough revenue to pay for their schooling

1 Ken Robinson, "Ken Robinson Says Schools Kill Creativity," filmed in 2006, TED video, posted June 2006, http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html.

2 Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1990).



Pakistani villagers carry water pots on their heads near a makeshift camp in the flood-hit Badin district on September 20, 2011. The historic monsoon rains affected millions, and shortages of clean drinking water led to outbreaks of acute illness. | AFP Photo: Asif Hassan

This self-sustainability makes a powerful case for the importance of safe space to youth empowerment. When I looked for the component of the Survival Girls project that led to such success, I saw it was connected to the process of working through trauma to a place of mental stability. That could only happen when the girls felt safe enough to begin to process what had happened to them. The Survival Girls taught me that safe space is a key part of community development in post-conflict zones and, therefore, in emergent democracies the developing world over.

The Survival Girls project grew out of a blurry beginning. All I knew when I got to Kenya was that I aimed to work with female refugees in the arts as an independent extension of the Great Globe Foundation, which brings theater workshops to Dadaab refugee camp, but other than that, I had

planned nothing specific, and this was intentional. I have participated in various development efforts over the last decade—from freedom of expression in Istanbul to a stint at a sustainable forestry NGO in central Russia—and the concept I found missing in most development projects was this: *innovation presupposes dysfunction*. It becomes relevant only when previous modes of operation aren't working anymore, or never did. What development documentation often lacks is permission for development workers to admit that their exact, backed-up-with-theory-and-research plan might not work on the ground. What the project then depends on, should things wander from the plan, is the worker's willingness to dance with things as they really are—to engage in the off-spreadsheet business of dealing with what's there—which, in development, is a largely *social* ability that is hard to budget

for. A Department of State official in Nairobi I spoke with put it this way: “If people proposing a project don’t have a full budget breakdown, I tell them, ‘Don’t waste my time. I need to know where American taxpayers’ money is going.’”

His words illustrate the conundrum often found in today’s community-development scenarios: Evidence-based planning is hard to argue with when it comes to getting your money’s worth, but it’s just as understandable that the we’ll-see-what-happens Survival Girls type of project can be successful too—particularly in environments for which we have little information to go on. For the first time in history, more people on Earth are young and urban than not. If there is a need for new policy structures in response to this unprecedented situation—and factors such as the Internet and the general interconnectedness and efficacy of non-state actors—we won’t find solutions in the policies of enforcement and isolation that worked (or didn’t) for former generations. I believe we’ll find it in, well, *less* structure—at least at first.

In Nairobi, I spoke with Kimberly Behrman, whose project at ZanaAfrica includes developing sanitary pads for girls who miss school because they don’t have them. “Some people ask us why we don’t have a reusable sanitary pad, because that would be more ‘green,’” she said, “and we explain that we simply *asked* the girls, and they don’t want pads they have to hang up to dry in front of everyone in the close quarters of the slums. The product wouldn’t be culturally viable.” We agreed how nice it would be if U.S. foreign aid were allowed more often to begin by “showing up, quieting down, and lending an ear” to communities there on the ground before writing a spreadsheet or report... before designing and implementing a project ostensibly meant to meet their needs.

Practically speaking, this calls for an investment in the social potential of aid workers—an

overhaul of development planning and implementation frameworks, so that *people* are initially invested in (not projects)—and for their aptitudes, not their budget breakdowns. An organization needs to trust the worker developing and putting a project into place to be sensitive and responsive to each unique community. In turn, the ideal development worker brings visibility to a community, offering its citizens the right to be seen and heard—and acknowledging their stake by creating a specific project in response to what’s been seen and heard.

Youth in the developing world are the future’s most important stakeholders. People under 30 make up 60% of the planet’s population, and 90% of the countries with largely young populations are in the developing world, where strife is more widespread. (Most, if not all, refugees, for example, are trauma victims, and there are at least 43 million of them, both young and old, concentrated in developing nations.) In post-conflict zones, entire communities are wrestling with the post-trauma experience—and within them, a great many young people. It will be difficult for a society of people to make strides forward if most people in that society are suffering from varying degrees of post-traumatic stress, which can erode one’s sense of context, consequence, and logic. Psychosocial support for youth is therefore of strategic importance to the economic and political longevity of developing countries in the coming century.

Understanding the burgeoning importance of youth to the structural integrity of governments worldwide, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton created a task force to look into youth affairs, directed by 24-year-old Ronan Farrow, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon focused renewed attention on youth in early 2012 in a speech outlining the actions he believes the global community must take over the next five years. I’m particularly interested in the connection between that structural integrity



Survival Girls rehearse for their performance in Nairobi's World Refugee Day Festivities, June 2011

Photo: Ming Holden

and the oft-dismissed term “safe space” because a successful development effort is a sustainable one, which allows for innovation—and innovation doesn't happen unless those who might practice it feel it is safe “to have a go,” as Sir Robinson puts it.

Strife-ridden societies don't come furnished with peaceful town squares, but that is not the kind of safe space I mean to describe here. I picture, rather, the Survival Girls and me sitting in a dirty corner of a church compound in that Nairobi slum, creating a temporary space from scratch with our presence—what humans can carry and give to one another just by being there. When youth sense community, they sense safety, and they sense *witness*—an audience, permission to ask for help, to let it out, to run the mile, to, in the case of the Survival Girls, dance and act the pain out onstage. And then? They're much more likely to move forward as healthy citizens, able to function and cope, to work hard and experience joy.

Youth are poised to be the source of either destructive or constructive political sea changes in the coming years. The Survival Girls are an example

of how important safe space is to the process of giving that youth a voice—a way out of trauma and into the mental ability to contribute to their communities and reform their societies. One way to do that is to invest in the social potential of aid workers to create safe space where previously “invisible” citizens can be sure that their preferences are the basis of changes made in their community. The reward for an American development and foreign aid policy that enables this kind of listening, this kind of safety, may actually be the greatest peace-building tool we have. The sea changes it encourages are those in the direction of peaceful, post-conflict society building by healthy, empowered citizens.

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